



A Reason to Rejoice During the Pandemic

Rabbi Andrew Shaw



With the Coronavirus' Delta variant spreading all over the world, *simcha* would appear to be out of reach for most of humanity. Is it possible to be joyous at such a time?

One of the main differences between this outbreak and pandemics of yesteryear is that now, due to science, we know exactly what is causing the infections and deaths.

During the Black Death, when 25 million people died, there was no understanding of germs or infection. Some of the explanations given at the time included the movements of the planets, a punishment from G-d, bad smells, corrupt air, enemies who had poisoned the wells, staring at a victim and wearing pointed shoes!

Science has endowed us with tremendous knowledge and insights about our world, but has also convinced many people that there is no longer any need for belief in G-d and religion.

"In the beginning, people believed in many gods. Monotheism came and reduced them to one. Science came and reduced them to none" (Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll*).

A few years ago, Brian Cox, the physicist, wrote a wonderful blog on the BBC website about how our existence depends on an apparently unlikely sequence of cosmic moments:

"For a billion years, the only life on Earth was single cells. Then something happened which created the template for all complex life. Two single cells merged together. They got inside each other and, instead of dying, formed a kind of hybrid, which survived and proliferated. And because every animal and plant today shares the same basic building block - the same type of cell structure - we are very confident that this only happened once, somewhere in the oceans of the primordial Earth. Biologists call this one-time event 'The Fateful Encounter,' and it suggests that complex life requires a good dose of random chance.

"The Big Bang, the moment when the Universe came into being, seems like the greatest chance event in the story of human existence. At the Big Bang, the ingredients of the Universe were created - a set of numbers, called constants of nature, such as the speed of light, the strength of gravity, and the number of dimensions of space. Remarkably, these numbers seem to be just right for our Universe to contain life. If they were just a little bit different, it might quickly collapse, or not contain the right chemical elements, or stars and planets might not form. So is there a reason that we seem to have won the cosmic lottery?"

Surely the incredible 'coincidences' science has discovered point to a Divine creator. And yet these unlikely 'coincidences' are described as 'random chance' and 'cosmic lottery.' Why? What scares us from believing? There is no need to detach our scientific brain from our faith.

During Sukkot, we sit in a rickety shack, look up at the stars and remember that Hashem has created this universe; that He brought us into this world for a deeply meaningful purpose.

Is it possible to experience *simcha* during a global pandemic? Yes, for at its core, *simcha* means realizing who we are and what we can achieve, regardless of the current predicament, and placing our faith not in finite human beings but in an infinite G-d. As Kohelet reminds us, "The end of the matter, everything having been heard: fear G-d and keep His commandments, for this is the entire Man" (Kohelet 12:13).

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